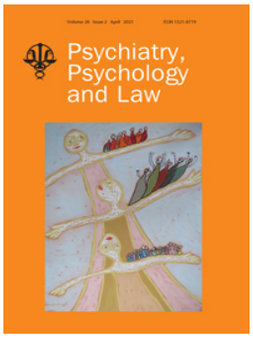

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Victims of sexual offences: Aspects impacting on participation, cooperation and engagement with the interview process

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The way in which police officers interview sexual offence victims is pivotal to how their cases proceed through the criminal justice system (CJS). However, such interviews have previously been found to be lacking in overall quality, with some interviewers finding them technically difficult and stressful to conduct. In addition, victims often feel disbelieved, unsafe and/or uncomfortable during their police interview. The present study provides insight into the personal experiences of five female adult rape/sexual assault victims regarding their police interviews and the aspects that encouraged them to cooperate and engage during the interview process. Following semi-structured interviews, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to identify three key themes: (i) heading into the unknown, (ii) difficulty of talking about the crime and (iii) helpful and unhelpful interviewer approaches. Implications for practice are discussed, together with the need to further our understanding of this specialist area of police work.

Keywords: police interviewing; rape; sexual assault; victim; secondary revictimisation; cooperation; humane interviewing.

Introduction

The interviewing of victims, witnesses and suspects of crime is a key component of policing (Kebbell & Milne, 1998), and the process of acquiring witness testimony is a fundamental aspect of the criminal justice system (CJS; Hope, 2013). For sexual crimes, interviews have been found to be 'technically difficult' and 'stressful' to conduct (Oxburgh et al., 2006), with interviewers required to demonstrate a set of enhanced skills that are not used as frequently in lower level crimes (Cherryman & Bull, 2001). The way in which an interviewer interacts with a sexual offence victim[1] is pivotal, and it has been widely reported that police officers adopt the role of 'gatekeepers' to the CJS (Frazier & Haney, 1996; Seneviratne, 2004). The ways in which officers interact with victims have implications for their psychological well-being (Alderden & Ullman, 2012; Campbell, 1998; Madigan & Gamble, 1991; Maier, 2008; Martin & Powell, 1994). Thus, it is essential that officers involved in such investigations are aware of

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[1]The authors acknowledge the ongoing debate regarding the terminology that ought to be used when referring to the victim of a crime. National Crime Victim Law Institute (2014) argues that the terms 'alleged victim' and 'complainant' are inappropriate as they fail to recognise the victim's legal status. The participants of the present study were all involved in criminal cases that resulted in a prosecution whereby the defendant was found guilty; thus, for the purpose of this article, the term 'victim' is used throughout.

how their conduct could impact on, and be perceived by, others (Patterson, 2011).

To ensure that victims and witnesses are able to provide reliable testimony, over the past three decades psychological research has contributed greatly to what is now known about optimum interviewing conditions (e.g. Bull & Cherryman, 1995; Clarke & Milne, 2001; Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; La Rooy & Dando, 2010; Oxburgh & Dando, 2011). Current guidance provided to police officers makes reference to different models and frameworks. In England and Wales, the PEACE[2] model of interviewing (Central Planning & Training Unit, 1992; Centrex, 2004) and the *Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings* guidelines (Ministry of Justice, 2011) share a similar ethos as to how victims should be treated during interview that is epitomised by key components of procedural justice theory (PJT), which include (see Lind & Tyler, 1992):

- Participation (being allowed to speak) – having the opportunity to present one's own side of the topic under discussion, being heard by the decision-maker (in this case, the police) and being treated fairly;
- Dignity – being treated with respect and politeness and having one's rights acknowledged by the decision-maker;
- Trust – believing that the decision-maker is concerned with one's welfare.

Victims' experiences of the interview process and rape myths

Sexual offence victims often find themselves in a unique situation in that very few other victims of crime are perceived with such disbelief, suspicion and blame (Felson & Pare, 2008; Jordan, 2001; McMillan & Thomas, 2009; Patterson, 2011). Such perceptions could be the result of the common misconceptions (known as rape myths) that circulate throughout society (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) and are sometimes present in police interviews (Campbell, 2005; Page, 2010). Interviewers are just as vulnerable to the same influences and biases that are associated with the processing of general information (McEwan, 2003) as members of the general public.

Various tools have been developed to measure rape myths and how they manifest themselves in those who have direct contact with victims of rape and sexual assault (Barber, 1974; Goodman-Delahunty & Graham, 2011; Page, 2008, 2010; Sleath & Bull, 2012). In terms of rape myth acceptance, the levels of endorsement are predominantly concerned with how an officer perceives rapists, rape victims and the offence of rape. The endorsement of different rape myths can have various implications for how an interview is conducted. However, there is a dearth of academic research that focuses on the experiences and perspectives of the victim during the interview process (but see Patterson, 2011). A major obstacle that each victim must overcome is the process of disclosure, which can be daunting and upsetting (Maddox et al., 2011). This is especially so given that they are required to describe very specific and personal details of the alleged offence to a complete stranger, sometimes repeatedly (Logan et al., 2005). Following rape or sexual assault, many victims feel vulnerable and are cautious as to how they will be perceived by police officers and whether or not they will be blamed or not believed (Herman, 1992; Patterson et al., 2009). The limited research which is available suggests that their experiences vary. For example, Campbell et al. (2001) noted that some victims are treated in a manner that is upsetting, and other researchers have found that almost half of all victims regard their experience of being interviewed as negative due to being told that their 'stories' are not credible, not believable or not serious enough to pursue and being questioned in a 'blaming'

[2]PEACE is a mnemonic acronym for the five-stage approach, which stands for: Planning and preparation; Engage and explain; Account, clarification and challenge; Closure and Evaluation.

manner (Campbell & Raja, 2005; Filipas & Ullman, 2001; Monroe et al., 2005). Such factors subsequently impact on the level of disclosure that victims offer (Patterson, 2011).

Factors influencing cooperation and participation

It is of paramount importance that police officers create a positive social and cognitive environment that encourages victims to recall and communicate accurately what happened (Westera et al., 2016). A specific requirement when investigating sexual crimes is the discussion of sensitive and personal details (i.e. exactly what the sexual act was and how it was committed). Whilst disclosure of these aspects of a sexual offence may be distressing and embarrassing for both officer (Oxburgh et al., 2006) and victim (Westera et al., 2016), this information is crucial in the determination of the case by prosecution authorities (Spohn & Tellis, 2014) and officers should not be deterred from attempting to obtain it. Despite victim cooperation being identified as an important factor in the decision-making of prosecution authorities (Spohn & Tellis, 2014), there is some evidence indicating that it can be difficult to achieve (Spohn et al., 2008; Tellis & Spohn, 2008). Given the 'unique' circumstances of how a sexual offence is usually committed – in a private setting with very few, if any, witnesses present (Oxburgh & Ost, 2011) – this places an even greater significance on victim cooperation during the investigation.

Approach of the interviewing officer

The attitude of an officer and how they engage with a victim plays a pivotal role in determining how that process might be experienced (Campbell, 2008). Victims are more likely to cooperate and engage if they feel that they will be treated fairly, politely and with respect (Lind & Tyler, 1992). The creation of a safe environment whereby victims feel supported and encouraged throughout all stages of the investigation is also paramount (Felson & Pare, 2008; Jordan, 2001). If an officer adopts a conducive approach, victims are more likely to feel supported and not judged (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Jamel et al., 2008; Milne & Bull, 1999).

Research conducted by Patterson (2011) involved a series of interviews with 20 rape victims, focusing on how interactions between the rape victim and interviewing officers can strengthen or weaken the overall investigation. In the cases that resulted in a prosecution, many of the victims reported that their interviews began with the officer consoling them, building rapport and then asking open and appropriate questions. Such questioning was reportedly conducted at a comfortable pace, with the victims given breaks when they became emotionally distressed. This all contributed to them feeling safe, comfortable and protected by the officers. These victims also indicated that they felt believed due to the positive behaviour of the officers during the interviews. In contrast, in the cases that did not result in a prosecution, the victims reported that the officers made no attempt at building rapport and that the pace of questioning was rapid and forceful. They also reported feeling disbelieved, unsafe and/or uncomfortable. However, it should be borne in mind that this research was conducted in the United States (US), where interviewing officers receive very different interview guidance to English and Welsh police officers. Therefore, some caution must be adopted before generalising the findings to interactions that take place in other countries.

Present study

The present study adopts a broadly similar approach to that of Patterson (2011) in order to investigate whether comparable findings would be obtained from rape/sexual assault victims in a different jurisdiction to the US – more specifically, England and Wales. Notably, there are two subtle differences between the present study and that of

Patterson. First, the victims interviewed in the present study were all involved in cases where a guilty verdict was delivered, whereas some of the victims interviewed by Patterson were involved in cases that did not result in a guilty verdict (e.g. the defendant was acquitted by a jury, the suspect was never apprehended, etc.). Second, all participants in the present study were interviewed by the same individual (the lead author), whereas in Patterson's study participants were interviewed by one of three trained interviewers. One similarity is that both studies utilised support from external agencies when recruiting participants.

Due to the conflicting literature surrounding how rape/sexual assault victims interpret their experiences of the interview process and the dearth of empirical research that examines their level of cooperation and participation, the present study has three broad aims: (i) to establish a better understanding of rape/sexual assault victims' experiences of the interview process; (ii) to ascertain what aspects influence victims to participate and cooperate (or not) during the interview process; and (iii) to investigate whether or not there are any aspects of the officers' approach that victims perceive as being effective (or non-effective) and any aspects that victims particularly like (or dislike).

Method

Design

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Willig, 2013) was utilised to explore the ways in which participants made sense of their police interview experiences. IPA enables researchers to obtain a better understanding of the nature and quality of the specific phenomena under investigation – and a key component is understanding how participants make sense of their lived experiences (Hanway & Akehurst, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The research process is dynamic and requires that the researcher take an active role in ensuring that they get close to the participant's personal world and gain an 'insider's perspective' (Conrad, 1987, as cited in Smith & Osborn, 2003). To interpret these lived experiences, IPA relies on the three principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.

The design and aim of the present study specifically highlight the importance of these principles and consequently justify the use of IPA. The eidetic principle of phenomenology is the process by which one attends to how things appear to the individuals experiencing them. As researchers, we aimed to identify the key components of how participants made sense of their police interviews and what made these experiences unique or identifiably different from others. Hermeneutics involves an attempt to enhance one's understanding of another's mindset and the language they use to communicate their experience of the world in order to accurately translate their message (Freeman, 2008). We attempted to envisage what it would be like to stand in the shoes of the participants, and through the interpretative process understand and then translate their experiences. Finally, idiography involves a thorough analysis on a case-by-case basis whereby each individual perspective from the sample of participants is examined in its own unique context. This principle is a key strength given our focus on the 'particular' as opposed to the 'universal' (Smith et al., 1995).

Participants

Prior to commencing the study, various meetings took place with two agencies that provide support to rape and sexual assault victims. It was agreed that members of staff providing such support would make an informed decision as to which service users they felt would be capable of participating in the study, paying particular attention to their mental health and engagement with the agency. This was deemed a sensible precaution given that those members of staff had already built up a rapport with potential participants and could speak with them in a safe environment about what the study entails. The inclusion criteria were

incorporated to ensure that participation in the study would not negatively influence or impact on participants' well-being or the judicial process as a whole (see Oxburgh et al., 2014). It was paramount that participants were not suffering with diagnosed mental health difficulties and that all cases involved were categorised as 'closed' and had been processed through the CJS. In addition, it was required that participants had been interviewed by the police in relation to being a victim of an offence concerned with rape and/or sexual assault. After potential participants were identified, they were provided with information regarding the study in addition to the lead author's contact details.

In total, eight individuals were identified and agreed to participate; however, three did not attend their appointments. Thus, a total of five females (all over the age of 18 years) who were victims of rape and/or other serious sexual assault took part in the study. Each participant had been interviewed by a different police officer from a range of different English police forces regarding the crime committed against them, and the interviews had all occurred between 3 and 10 years previously ($M = 7.60$, $SD = 2.72$). All of the participants' cases resulted in a prosecution.

Although some IPA studies have included up to fifteen participants, the available guidance states that much smaller sample sizes are appropriate for a study utilising this approach (Turpin et al., 1997). Smaller sample sizes provide researchers with adequate qualitative data that enable them to explore similarities and differences between participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) – a key feature of the present study.

Materials and procedure

Following ethical clearance by the lead author's institution, full consent was obtained and each participant decided when and where their interview would take place. They were also informed that they could have another person present if they wished. All participants then underwent one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted by the lead author. Each interview was audio-recorded and ranged from 25 to 56 minutes in duration ($M = 41$, $SD = 11$). A specially designed interview schedule[3] was used which was broken down into five different subsections that focused on participants' experiences relating to the following:

1. The build-up prior to the police interview;
2. The beginning of the police interview;
3. The main account;
4. Closing the interview;
5. Their overall experience of the interview process.

The interview schedule contributed to the elicitation of rich and detailed accounts of participants' experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) whilst maintaining a flexible manner (Bryman, 2008). A mixture of question typologies (e.g. *open* and other *appropriate* questions; see Oxburgh et al., 2010) was used in the interview schedule to enable participants to provide detailed information. Examples of questions include 'Explain how the interviewing officer began the interview' and 'Describe if the interviewing officer made the interview process easier for you'. During each interview, the lead author consciously monitored how the discussion was affecting the participant in order to ensure that their personal safety and comfort was maintained. This active role was essential as it enabled the identification of certain topic areas or questions that were being experienced as problematic, for which it could then be determined whether they should be revisited at a later point during the interview or avoided altogether. Finally, each interview culminated with a thorough debrief whereby the participant was given the opportunity to ask any questions (in relation to the study).

[3]A full copy of the interview schedule is available upon request from the lead author.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and included utterances from both the lead author and the participant. Whilst transcribing the audio-recordings, the predominant focus was placed on the actual text (Willig, 2013) and obtaining as much information from each of the interviews as possible (Smith et al., 2009). Details relating to inaudible utterances and the lengths of pauses were not documented given that the primary aim of IPA is to analyse the content of the account (Hanway & Akehurst, 2018). Each transcript was read a number of times whilst simultaneously listening to the accompanying audio-recording. Notes and comments were then made in relation to the content, language use (including metaphors and repetition), context and initial interpretative comments of the transcript wording (Smith et al., 2009).

Each set of notes was then transformed into emergent themes. Each of the transcripts was separately analysed by the lead author and, subsequently, each produced its own set of themes. Once a set of emergent themes had been formulated for each interview, connections between themes (across all transcripts) were formed, grouping them together based on conceptual similarities and providing each collection with a descriptive label. As with most qualitative methodologies, the objectivity of the findings can be questioned. To address any concerns regarding misinterpretation, inaccuracy or researcher bias, regular meetings took place with the co-author throughout data analysis. This process was advantageous as it enabled the lead author to present the subordinate themes and the quotations that justified their development and grouping with each of the superordinate themes. Any disagreements were discussed, which helped to guide the analyses and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Results

A total of three superordinate and eight subordinate themes emerged from the data of what our participants perceived and experienced during the police interview process (see Table 1). The focus of the themes that emerged includes both positive and negative reflections.

Superordinate Theme 1: Heading into the unknown

This theme relates to advance understanding of what was going to occur during the interview (and overall investigation) process and where

Table 1 Summary of the superordinate and subordinate themes and which participants referred to them.

	Participants referring to theme					
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	Total
1 – Heading into the unknown	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	**5**
1A – Lack of clarity about the process	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5
1B – Feelings of isolation	✓	✓			✓	3
2 – Difficulty of talking about the crime	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	**5**
2A – Cognitive load		✓	✓	✓	✓	4
2B – Magnitude of disclosing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5
2C – Secondary revictimisation	✓	✓	✓		✓	4
3 – Helpful and unhelpful interviewer approaches	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	**5**
3A – Humanity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5
3B – The guiding chaperone	✓	✓				2
3C – Rigidity	✓		✓		✓	3

guidance and direction would come from. The level of uncertainty experienced was perceived to be the result of (i) lack of clarity about the process and (ii) feelings of isolation.

Subordinate Theme 1A: Lack of clarity about the process

All participants reported that this aspect negatively impacted their overall experience. They referred to a lack of transparency from officers and described the ways in which this was evident at various stages of the interview process. Some commented on how more information would have been useful in helping them to prepare for the interview:

> I would have liked some information or maybe some leaflets to say what the process was going to be, who would have my information, where it's gone to and a little bit about them themselves, it would have been a little more personalised. (Participant 5)

Other participants highlighted how having a better understanding of what was going to happen during and after the interview would have made their experience more positive:

> I kind of understand why the police said no [about conducting the interview on the night of the assault as opposed to returning the following morning] because they might have thought I was tired or upset or whatever, but I would have liked to maybe have that explained to me. (Participant 2)

All participants made reference to this subordinate theme and were very explicit in how they were left wondering what was going to happen:

> Very apprehensive because I didn't know what to expect, anxiety levels were really high. (Participant 5)

This lack of clarity about what to expect from the interview process may have exacerbated the feelings of isolation that participants reported experiencing.

Subordinate Theme 1B: Feelings of isolation

A priority in any interview with a rape/sexual assault victim should be to ensure that they do not feel vulnerable or alienated. This will help convey to the victim that their account is being taken seriously and that the interviewer is concerned for their well-being. The sources of support identified as potentially being beneficial to victims vary from the officer (or the police force as a whole) conducting the interview to the support groups and counsellors that they rely upon. However, our participants revealed that on some occasions such support was not always evident:

> She [the interviewing officer] just asked if I was alright and everything and I said 'yeah'. That was about it really, she never offered me any support or anything like that, no leaflets, nothing [...] well I thought I would have been offered something. (Participant 4)

The influence of the police was also reported as having prevented participants from engaging with support organisations:

> I used to go to Harbour [a support organisation] and Harbour had a group, and on a Tuesday we would meet up for two hours, have a cup of coffee and a biscuit and a little chat. The police stopped me from doing it. (Participant 1)

The feelings of isolation are epitomised by participants having to seek support from elsewhere to gain clarity about the status of their investigation when officers conducting the interviews failed to keep them informed:

> It took a while, I think I asked [a staff member from the agency offering support] to phone to find out what happened [in relation to how the investigation was progressing]. (Participant 5)

Superordinate Theme 2: Difficulty of talking about the crime

Difficulty of talking about the crime is centred around three main focal points: (i) cognitive

load; (ii) magnitude of disclosing; and (iii) secondary revictimisation.

Subordinate Theme 2A: Cognitive load

Four participants reported how they struggled throughout the interview to process what was happening. They referred to having other priorities that resulted in them being unable to fully concentrate on the actual interview itself:

> and I was panicking about things I shouldn't have even been thinking about. (Participant 2)

Some participants reported how they were preoccupied with their performance during the interview and how this may have impacted on officers' perceptions of them:

> There are lots of things going on in your brain at the same time when I'm telling a story and I'm watching them [the interviewing officers] to see if they are listening. (Participant 5)

The final aspect related to cognitive load involves participants making reference to feeling like they were on autopilot during the interview, saying whatever 'pops into your head':

> She understood that I'm going to have blanks and I'm going to be saying one thing and then perhaps contradicting what I've said because it's not straight in my head. I had a habit of blurting things out how I was remembering them, which wasn't in a chronological order. (Participant 3)

Subordinate Theme 2B: Magnitude of disclosing

Each participant described how they felt in the build up to their interview, and the emotive language used emphasises how daunting a task it was:

> I was petrified. Absolutely petrified! (Participant 1)

> Very nervous, very scared, upset. I think I cried [for] most of it. (Participant 4)

The language used also provides connotations as to how the magnitude of disclosing is comparable with a loss of control. Several participants had not previously told anyone what had happened to them, and the subsequent disclosure of details during the interview was like an explosion in that – all of a sudden – they were sharing the responsibility (and burden) of that sensitive and personal information:

> As I sat down and it was being recorded that's it you know – I'm about to explode my world in every way, shape and form. (Participant 2)

> It was just like telling everyone your dirty washing and your secrets. (Participant 5)

The experiences that our participants referred to epitomise how, following the decision to disclose (however long it may have been since the incident in question), there is a limited window of opportunity for officers to obtain that information:

> I don't think that they get that once you open your mouth, you want to get it out before you decide not to open your mouth anymore. Because, and I've said it a million times to people, there is only a very small window in people who are suffering. (Participant 2)

Participants were explicit as to how their experiences impacted on their well-being both at the time of their interview and after the process had come to an end. They experienced feelings of embarrassment and guilt, and were unable to cognitively function. Their feelings and experiences following disclosure exhibit psychological indicators of exhaustion, both physical and mental:

> It has a big psychological impact on you. (Participant 3)

> I probably should have gone to the doctor,

> but I never even gave it a thought. (Participant 4)

Subordinate Theme 2C: Secondary revictimisation

Four participants made reference to how the interview process impacted on them and what their experience of it was like:

> It's horrible having to re-explain and go into re-service [re-experience]. (Participant 2)

> Horrible really, because you're reliving it […] you get flashbacks while you're sitting there, and you have to try and move on […]. You go back into it, you start to relive some of it. (Participant 3)

Participants described how their interviews had resulted in them 'reliving' what they had experienced. However, they did also acknowledge that this was probably not the intention of the officers, rather it was the result of a lack of understanding about how to elicit relevant information:

> I think getting the information is one thing, but understanding is a very different thing. I think the more they have an understanding, the more they'll get the better information. (Participant 4)

Superordinate Theme 3: Helpful and unhelpful interviewer approaches

Notable amongst all participants, the final theme predominantly highlights the ways in which good practice improved how the interview process was experienced. Particular attention is paid to three specific aspects: (i) humanity; (ii) the guiding chaperone; and (iii) rigidity.

Subordinate Theme 3A: Humanity

All participants commented on how some officers' humane approach to their interview assisted them by creating a safe and comfortable environment in which they felt at ease. These components were repeatedly referred to and identified by some participants as being integral to the interview process. Participants emphasised that officers, at all costs, should strive to avoid placing victims under pressure and instead allow them to move through the process at their own pace:

> the police officer, she was nice, take it at your own pace sort of thing – I felt fine that way, I didn't feel pressurised or anything like that. (Participant 2)

> She was very thoughtful, very caring and acknowledged when I was getting upset so I think she was really good. She had feelings, she showed empathy. (Participant 3)

An additional component valued by participants is being treated in a way that caused them to feel that they were important, that they were believed and that the officers were committed to their case. Again, all participants highlighted in some way how behaviours that fostered a feeling of being heard and taken seriously were key to improving their overall experience of the interview process:

> I always felt believed which was a lovely feeling, because I would hate to think I wasn't believed, which must be horrible. I don't know how people can cope when there is any doubt or that sort of thing. (Participant 2)

> He did reassure me that he took his job very seriously and this is what they worked on, so I did feel as if they were in my corner. (Participant 5)

Subordinate Theme 3B: The guiding chaperone

This relates to the roles that officers played during the interview process. The experiences of two participants highlight just how integral the guidance was for them, and how having continuity with the same officers enabled them to get through the interview. Participants spoke of officers as an anchor or source of support that was crucial to them during the interview process:

> I'm just so glad it was [the same officer] because the thought of having to tell people over and over and over again, it's reliving it and it's bad enough as it is. (Participant 1)

> apart from the initial interview that was done by the sexual offences liaison officer (SOLO), I was then only dealt with by those two officers and the continuity was lovely. You knew you didn't have to explain everything over and over again because they knew everything, they knew you and how you worked […]. And I think because I had the same officer all the time, she got to know that and we did have a brilliant relationship, I couldn't praise her enough for that but I'm not sure everyone gets that same continuity. (Participant 2)

Subordinate Theme 3C: Rigidity

Some participants expressed a perception that police officers approach all crimes with a 'one size fits all' mentality:

> I've been interviewed by the police before just for a minor offence […] Looking back, it was identical, they were very, very similar processes, they just want to know facts. (Participant 4)

Participants elaborated on this issue further, stating that although there is a need for a caring approach, if it is not genuine (or is not perceived to be genuine) then it will be detrimental to the interview process:

> They need to put somebody in that does genuinely care because you can tell. (Participant 1)

> He was trying to get that, he was going quite well at it, but I could see it, I could read it, you know, it was textbook. (Participant 4)

In contrast, when officers were perceived as being genuinely invested in participants' cases, this had a positive impact:

> if somebody doesn't really give a shit you're not going to open up as much, and he did care. (Participant 1)

> He was genuinely interested and committed to what they did. (Participant 5)

Discussion

The aim of this study is threefold: (i) to establish a better understanding of rape/sexual assault victims' experiences of the interview process; (ii) to ascertain what aspects influence victims to participate and cooperate (or not) during the interview process; and (iii) to investigate whether or not there are any aspects of the officers' approach that victims perceive as being effective (or non-effective) and any aspects that victims particularly like (or dislike). In total, three superordinate and eight subordinate themes were identified from the qualitative responses provided by our participants in relation to their experiences of the police interview process, inclusive of positive and negative reflections. Each of these is discussed below in the context of the existing literature.

Heading into the unknown

All participants expressed that the interview process requires changes in the form of added clarity and the removal of feelings of isolation. Participants referred to being uncertain as to what they should expect before, during and after the interview. A victim will likely be more comfortable with an officer who is transparent about the process and what they are doing and going to do, as opposed to one who comes across as suspicious and/or guarded (Patterson, 2011). Although the findings from the present study do not necessarily align with those of Patterson, there are certain parallels. Patterson documented that in cases that resulted in prosecution, victims reported feeling safe, comfortable and protected by the officers. These responses were obtained when exploring the manner of questioning used, and whilst they do not specifically allude to clarity and feelings of isolation, the development of rapport would help to alleviate such concerns.

Being helped by officers to feel safe, comfortable and protected could help to reduce the anxieties felt by victims, thereby resulting in them being more likely to disclose sensitive and personal details (Westera et al., 2016). It is possible that, due to the cognitive demands of interviewing rape/sexual assault victims, officers may feel under pressure and consequently exhibit behaviours that do not comply with guidance and best practice (Hanway & Akehurst, 2018). Although the participants were, overall, critical of the interview process, suggestions were made as to how it can be improved.

Difficulty of talking about the crime

The second emergent theme related to participants' experiences of the interview process is the difficulty of talking about the crime. This is due to a number of aspects, including cognitive load, the magnitude of making a disclosure and the secondary revictimisation that can occur. The psychological impact of rape/sexual assault is severe and wide-ranging, with at least one in three victims believed to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or some other form of anxiety problem (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Each individual victim will have unique circumstances that should be taken into consideration, and efforts should be made to alleviate any concerns that may be detrimental to the victim's performance during the interview. The findings from the present study corroborate those of Patterson (2011) in that if victims are helped to feel at ease and their thought processes are consequently focused on the interview process itself, they will not be as preoccupied with how they are performing or whether or not the officer believes their account. Cognitive load theory (CLT; Paas & Van Merriënboer, 1994; Sweller et al., 1998) involves the development of instructional methods that efficiently use an individual's limited cognitive processing capacity in a way that stimulates their ability to apply existing knowledge and skills to new situations. However, once that load exceeds capacity, the individual's performance on any given task will suffer (Jansen et al., 2017). When applied to the operational setting of an interview and victims' ability to recall relevant information, and given the traumatic nature of the crime that they have experienced, disclosing sensitive and personal details could well be distressing (Westera et al., 2016). Furthermore, the experience of having to recall such details is difficult enough without having concerns about issues outside of the interview room (such as what family members may think or do if they were to become aware of the investigation). Each investigation should be treated as unique, and officers should give due consideration to the individual differences that exist amongst victims which could subsequently have an impact on how they may present or need to be treated.

When making the decision to disclose, this for some victims could be the first time they have ever spoken about the crime. Our participants' responses indicate that the interview process is a daunting and distressing experience for victims of rape/sexual assault – therefore, being attentive to their needs and easing that initial 'explosion' of sensitive and personal information is key to ensuring that they are capable of continuing with the interview and the subsequent investigation. This finding improves our understanding of research which indicates that, regardless of who the crime is reported to, the interview process is a highly emotive experience – and when victims are helped to feel at ease, they are more comfortable sharing their account, which subsequently increases the disclosure of relevant information (Maddox et al., 2011; Patterson, 2011). The trauma associated with sexual crimes extends far beyond the assault itself, and the nature of the response that victims are met with can also impact on their personal well-being (Campbell et al., 2001). Research has highlighted how the majority of rape/sexual assault victims do not report the crime to the police (for various reasons) – and of those that do there is a mixed response when reflecting

on how they are treated (Venema, 2016). Negative experiences could act as a deterrent to other victims who may be considering reporting a sexual crime. When the decision is made by the victim to make a disclosure this requires an appropriate response. Many officers are familiar with the phrase 'the golden hour' (see Oxburgh & Hynes, 2016), which refers to the fact that within the first hour of an investigation high volumes of evidence are often readily available. However, in rape/sexual assault cases, especially if the victim is exhausted and vulnerable to memory lapses due to fatigue, this golden hour opportunity may not apply (see Geiselman, 2010; Hope et al., 2012). It may be instead that a similar window of opportunity exists in the decision-making processes of rape/sexual assault victims, whereby officers only have a short period during which they can successfully attempt to obtain the relevant information from the victim. Therefore, it is important for officers to understand this potential variation in the golden hour for sexual crimes and adjust their approach and priorities accordingly.

The final and most significant issue that must be considered by officers is the potential for secondary revictimisation, which relates to victim-blaming attitudes, behaviour and practices that further the rape event and result in additional trauma (Campbell et al., 2001). This has been identified as a significant concern in cases involving rape/sexual assault victims (Maier, 2008) and is evident in the present study. Although some participants commented that reliving the experience was the only method which enabled them to recall the required details, the use of contextual reinstatement is a process that must be managed very carefully. The physical and mental implications of secondary revictimisation do not just impact on the victim during the interview but also afterwards (inclusive of when a trial may have concluded). It is unlikely that officers intentionally cause secondary revictimisation – rather, many officers conducting interviews with rape/sexual assault victims may not fully understand how much of an impact their actions can have during the interview process (Campbell, 2005). However, previous research by Patterson (2011) has found that when officers attend to victims' emotional well-being by slowing the pace of the interview, this enables them to manage their flashbacks and continue.

Helpful and unhelpful interviewer approaches

Finally, participants identified various components that had both a positive and a negative impact on their experiences of the interview process. The interview guidance that officers receive in England and Wales is specific in terms of how they should conduct themselves and approach the overall questions that should be asked (Ministry of Justice, 2011). Our participants discussed how specific components helped to ease their experiences of the interview process by making them feel safe, comfortable and believed. These findings corroborate those of Patterson (2011) who also found that when cases resulted in a prosecution the victims reported feeling safe, comfortable and protected by the officers. However, our participants did raise some notable concerns and stress how some aspects of the interview process had a detrimental effect on their experiences. Firstly, participants emphasised the importance of only having to recall the relevant details to the same officers. Limiting the number of officers that victims interact with enhances their comfort levels and reduces the likelihood of secondary revictimisation. This aspect is so prominent amongst the participants that a subordinate theme specifically relating to it emerged. Secondly, it is paramount that officers involved in investigations of sexual crimes are aware of how they conduct themselves, as it can influence the overall quality of the investigation (Patterson, 2011). The investigation of sexual crimes is not comparable with the investigation of volume crimes; thus, a different approach that is sensitive to the various issues is absolutely

necessary. Those officers conducting the interviews must be fully invested in the case and trained appropriately in order to ensure that they are aware of the many different facets that could influence victims' experiences of the interview process (see Patterson, 2011). If they are not, this will be apparent and the victims will detect it.

Implications for practice

Investigative interviewing *per se* is a highly complex and cognitively demanding process, and sexual offence investigations specifically have been found to be 'technically difficult' and 'stressful' to conduct (Oxburgh et al., 2006; Powell, 2002). In order to ensure that interview practices continue to improve, it is imperative that best practice guidelines and training materials are regularly reviewed, and that feedback from those parties involved in the process (inclusive of interviewees) is utilised. This enables an examination of the practices that officers believe to be effective – and, where they are found wanting, an exploration as to why they may not be as effective as first thought. The qualitative responses provided by the participants in the present study shed light on their experiences of the interview process, some of which specifically relate to best practice.

Firstly, the guidance offered in the first stage of *Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings* advises that in order to attain future successful communication, the interviewer should build a rapport with the interviewee and put them at ease by establishing a sense of trust (Ministry of Justice, 2011). If such guidance is followed when interviewing rape/sexual assault victims this will likely reduce the tension and insecurity felt, which in turn could help to reduce anxieties. Ensuring that the process is as stress free as possible is crucial, and the use of a victim-focused approach to interviewing – one that utilises breaks and encourages victims to take their time – has also been found to result in victims being more likely to disclose sensitive and personal details (Westera et al., 2016) and therefore increase the likelihood of a successful prosecution (Patterson, 2011). It is evident from our participants' responses that officers are either not adhering to the guidance and training currently being offered (at least in England and Wales) or are not being trained effectively. As such, it may be beneficial to review those materials (or the training of those practices) given the feedback obtained from our participants that highlights the negative impacts of avoidable stressors.

Secondly, participants made reference to an increase in cognitive load as a result of being preoccupied with how they were performing during the interview. As relevant information is elicited from the victim, the interviewer may interpret it using 'gut feelings' or 'common sense' (Salet, 2017) – and if the information does not fit with their expectations then it may be difficult to remain impartial and not let their true feelings be known. Goffman (1990) refers to masking one's true feelings as 'impression management', whereby a range of techniques and strategies can be employed to control the impression that one presents to others. If officers conducting interviews with rape/sexual assault victims are educated and trained about the importance of impression management then this could help to address victims' concerns about feeling as though they are not being believed or are being blamed for what happened to them. In turn, this could also reduce the demonstration of inappropriate behaviour by officers when interviewing victims who do not fit the rape/sexual assault victim stereotype (e.g. those who display symptoms of PTSD, emotional numbness or dissociation). Consequently, there is a need for best practice guidelines to develop an increased awareness of the implications of PTSD and other anxiety-related issues that will enhance the understanding of officers who conduct interviews with rape/sexual assault victims and others who may have been traumatised by what they have experienced.

Finally, it is crucial when interviewing rape/sexual assault victims that all efforts are made to ensure that they do not suffer secondary revictimisation – officers must do everything possible to minimise the likelihood of this occurring. Participants in the present study made reference to several approaches that can address this danger. The first approach focuses on continuity by keeping the same officers involved throughout the investigation. We fully acknowledge that this may not always be possible, but the handover of information to other officers can be detailed and thorough in order to reduce the number of times that the victim is required to clarify or recall sensitive and personal details that may be distressing to think and talk about. The second approach concerns specialist training. Maddox et al. (2011) have argued that additional specialist training is needed for police officers involved in sexual crime investigations in order to highlight the importance of the disclosure stage for victims, asserting that an increased psychological understanding in officers could be beneficial. Such training could also extend to the use of interview techniques regarding contextual reinstatement, because whilst it may not be officers' intention to cause secondary revictimisation, the responses from our participants suggest that this is an issue which requires further consideration. The third and final approach refers to the genuineness of the officers who conduct the interview. It was reiterated by our participants that any insincere efforts to build rapport and use empathy are very easily recognisable. Thus, officers should be aware of how they conduct themselves. We argue that police forces should consider utilising some kind of screening process to identify personnel who have the ideal traits (e.g. humanity, higher levels of empathy) for successfully implementing a victim-focused approach. It is recommended that current best practice and training guidance are reviewed to ensure that, when interacting with rape/sexual assault victims, officers are not only fully aware of the importance of demonstrating a genuine approach but also understand the importance of empathy, how to recognise it and how to respond to victims who provide opportunities to show it (see Oxburgh et al., 2012, 2014).

Strengths and limitations

Like all applied research, this study has both strengths and limitations. One major strength is its high ecological validity, which provides a rare insight into the detailed specifics of what actually occurs during the interview process between officer and victim. Our participants (although a relatively small sample) are unique in that they were willing to take part in research of this nature. Wheatcroft et al. (2009) highlight how this topic is still very much a 'taboo subject', with many victims being unwilling to speak about it. Thus, whilst our participants' views and experiences may not be representative of all rape/sexual assault victims, these findings can be viewed as a general consensus of those who are willing to discuss their personal experiences. However, the sample can also be viewed as a limitation, given that it consists of only five female victims who were all involved in cases that resulted in a guilty verdict. The authors acknowledge that this could have impacted on how participants reflected on their experiences of the interview process. For example, would male victims report similar experiences, and how would a not guilty or failure to prosecute decision impact on victims' reflections?

Our inclusion criterion (i.e. each case must have been processed through the CJS) could also be considered a limitation. However, it was deemed paramount that participation in the study would not negatively influence or impact on participants' well-being or the judicial process as a whole. Timing is also a limitation – with rape/sexual assault, the delay between the actual crime being committed and the victim making the decision to disclose it to the police can vary greatly (in some cases, such as the Jimmy Savile inquiry, it can be over thirty years—

see Smith (2016)). Therefore, inconsistencies can occur in a sample if there is no specific time frame defined for the period between the date of the crime and the date of the initial police interview. With regard to the present study, a time-related inconsistency that could not be avoided is the length of time since participants had been interviewed by the police, which ranged from three to ten years at time of participation. As time goes by, the ability to access memories begins to degrade and so the accuracy of the participants' accounts could be challenged (Memon et al., 2010). However, Goodman and colleagues (2003) found that traumatic events (e.g. sexual offences) are generally well remembered and that a positive relationship exists between the seriousness of the abuse and vividness of the related memory (Alexander et al., 2005). Nevertheless, given the unique nature of the participant group and the dearth of research currently available, we assert that these findings act as a solid foundation for future exploration into the dynamics involved in rape/sexual assault victim interviews.

Future directions

The investigative interview process is a complex interaction that involves a high level of cognitive functioning from both victims and officers, and it is essential that further research be conducted in order to enhance our understanding of it. Future research needs to explore firstly the level of clarity that rape/sexual assault victims have regarding the subsequent investigations that they are going to be involved in and secondly how that clarity influences feelings of isolation and levels of comfort. Not only are these aspects important for victims' well-being but they could also be linked to the amount of relevant information elicited – and consequently to investigations yielding successful prosecutions. There is also a need to explore the ways in which rape/sexual assault victims' cognitive load fluctuates during the interview process, how this impacts on the elicitation of relevant information and how difficult the interaction is for victims. Future research should also explore whether or not officers can be trained to demonstrate humanity and empathy, and whether or not victims are able to differentiate between the varying levels of 'genuineness' portrayed by officers (and differentiate between officers with and without such training). A final area of exploration should focus on how male rape/sexual assault victims reflect on their experiences of the interview process and whether or not the experiences of victims involved in cases that returned a not guilty verdict or did not result in a prosecution differ from those of the participants in the present study (five females whose cases all returned a guilty verdict).

Conclusions

Our findings illustrate the complexity of interview interactions with victims of rape/sexual assault. The three main themes that emerged highlight both areas of good practice (e.g. officers adopting a humane approach and demonstrating a genuine commitment to cases) and areas that require improvement (e.g. providing victims with clarity about what to expect and having a better understanding of how to minimise the likelihood of secondary revictimisation occurring). The psychological effects, both short and long term, which occur as a result of sexual crimes can be (and often are) huge. Therefore, it is imperative that research focuses on the perspective of the victim and that a better understanding is obtained of what stressors and triggers are present during the interview process. On the other side of the interview table, we should also strive to highlight and circulate best practice so that officers are able to benefit from better information and training.

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Ethical standards

Declaration of conflicts of interest

William S. Webster has declared no conflict of interests.Gavin E. Oxburgh has declared no conflict of interests.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of Newcastle University's Faculty of Medical Sciences Research Ethics Committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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